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ABSTRACT

As the child care field moves toward professionalism, it is necessary to consider the ways in which academic instruction may enhance professionalization. One dimension of the definition of a profession is that a profession has control over the key elements of its own destiny. For example, a profession (1) controls entry into the profession, (2) establishes its own standards of expertise, (3) develops its own organizational structures, and (4) regulates its own membership. Given these "keys" to control, the pragmatics of the situation require a "top-down" approach to professionalization. Consideration of the structure of knowledge and of academic institutions, links between academic institutions and professional organizations, and the relationship between academic subjects and certification suggests that the preparation of senior academic leadership is an essential ingredient for movement of the child care field toward professionalization. Future leaders of the child care field will need an educational program that promotes the integration of knowledge on three levels: disciplinary and hierarchical, interdisciplinary and holistic, and thematic and hierarchical. (Concluding remarks focus briefly on issues of student selection and program design.) (Author/RH)

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Up the Down Escalator: How to Open the Door

Comments

on

Professionalism and Academic Credentials

in

Child Care

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Up the Down Escalator: How to Open the Door
Comments on Professionalism and Academic Credentials in Child Care

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As the child care field moves toward professionalism, it is necessary to consider the ways in which academic instruction may enhance professionalization. Several aspects of this topic warrant comment. In essence, I have chosen to comment on four themes, each of which strongly suggests a "top-down" approach to the structure of child care education. Put another way, professionalism of the child care field needs to ride up the down escalator of educational credentialing and have in hand the correct keys if the door is to be opened. In the following sections, I will belabor this mixed metaphore.

Defining a Profession

Calling oneself or one's occupation professional does not make it so. One has to be viewed as professional both by oneself and by others. The basic characteristics of a profession and of a professional might be summarized by the concept of "internal locus of control." A professional is self-motivated, self-directed, and self-confident. A profession has control over the key elements of its own destiny. Such control (Austin, 1981) brings its own rewards both tangible (e.g., dollars, hours, etc.) and intangible (e.g., respect).

The "key" elements of control include:

1. Controlled entry into the profession. This means that licensing, certification, and competency standards are in the command of the profession itself rather than external regulatory bodies.

2. The ability to define and set standards for an identifiably unique, common educational knowledge base that represents the particular expertise of the field. Corollaries to this include:

2(a) The profession can itself generate the new knowledge necessary to advance the field.

2(b) The profession assumes the major responsibility for transmission of that knowledge to neophyte members.

2(c) The profession defines the relationship between knowledge and academic credentialling--the externally visible currency of respect.

3. A stable, responsible organizational structure to which individuals may relate for purposes of identity, support, and mutual self-interest. Corollary to this is the notion that:

3(a) Individual self-interest is subjugated, to the degree necessary, to provide a unified front when dealing with external forces ranging from social change, through competition with other professions, to dealing with bureaucratic structures of government.

3(b) A cadre of leadership exists that can act for and guide the profession.

4. Self-regulation of the membership. Although implied in the three previous elements, self-regulation goes beyond entry, educational, and negotiation control. It requires a set of ethical standards and basic

operating procedures against which membership performance can be measured and the availability of meaningful sanctions for self-policing. These concepts of a profession are not new (cf. Keith-Lucas, 1980), but they do require hard-headed recognition of what it takes to become a profession.

Gaining Control

Even a cursory scanning of these "keys" suggests that, if opening the door of professionalism is the desired goal, the pragmatics of the situation requires a top-down approach--with the major emphasis on development of a cadre of academic leaders. Let's look at some of these pragmatic reasons.

Knowledge and Academic Structure

At a very basic level:

1. The faculty of academic institutions (junior colleges, colleges, and universities), even the most authoritarian ones, defines the knowledge base for degree programs. The faculty is paid to do this and to transmit that knowledge to students.

2. Within our society, academic credentials (degree level and institutional reputation) are the currency of respect and upward mobility. Academic institutions are the only institutions in our society that have the power to grant academic credentials.

3. Within universities, the academic survival of faculty members depends upon the generation and publication of new knowledge. In recent years, special emphasis has focused upon (and federal funds flow to) the generation and dissemination of "socially useful" knowledge.

Also basic, but perhaps less obvious:

4. Identifiably unique bodies of knowledge, academic structures

(departments, colleges, schools, etc.), and degrees or credentials go hand in hand within academic institutions. This is true even when the unique body of knowledge is not based in the basic disciplines. Universities and colleges have structures to incorporate multidisciplinary bodies of knowledge. We will come back to this point later.

Recognition of the relationship between knowledge and academic structures suggests that before one of the major "keys" to the professionalization of child care is in place (i.e., defining the knowledge base), there needs to be a sufficient number of academically credible people to staff the faculties of our institutions of higher learning, to define the knowledge base, generate new knowledge, recruit students, and convince the administration that they warrant a visible and stable administration structure that is associated with appropriate credentialing.

Academic Institutions and Professional Organizations

There are many "professional" organizations in our society. There are many "professional" organizations in the child care (or related services) fields--some of which are struggling for recognition and existence. Organizations that have credibility and clout usually have: (a) close academic ties, (b) meetings and conferences where sharing ideas, knowledge, and skills is a central purpose, (c) continuity of leadership, and (d) regular means for communication and the dissemination of knowledge (i.e., newsletters, bulletins, journals, etc.). Why? Because these are essential to the sense of "identity" of a profession. One becomes a professional through education, keeps up by reading and attending meetings, and gains a sense of direction from the organization.

At a more pragmatic level, these organizational activities are the very kinds of things (although not the only ones) for which academics

get rewarded. Promotion and tenure committees, and department heads at salary-increase time, love to see: (a) memberships in professional organizations (leadership position holding is even better), (b) presentations made at conferences, (c) publications in journals, and (d) editorial responsibilities. Personal professional networks are increasingly important for promotion to senior ranks. Such networks are built at conferences and through publication and editorial activities.

The academic community not only rewards such activities, it supports them logistically through travel money, secretarial support, and the like. Service agencies generally do not. It is not surprising, therefore, that the leadership in professional organizations is generally academically based. It also is not surprising that it was a university-based faculty, housed in an academic unit with "child care" in its name, that was able to obtain the grant funds to fund, for example, the Conference-Research Sequence in Child Care Education so that the formation of a new national organization might be considered. That's what leadership is about.

It strikes me that the organizers of the Conference-Research Sequence were also sensitive to the other corollary of this key, namely the necessity of working together for the greater good. If, as has been suggested, strong and consistent academic leadership is necessary for professionalization, the joining of the day and residential fields is important indeed. In numbers, ideas, and clout, the leaders in the day care field have much to offer the residential child care field. Conversely, because of the changing clientele of day care (both in terms of age and type of children served) and because of the challenge presented for control of the day care field by the traditional education profession and by unionization, it behooves day care personnel to ally themselves with their closer kin in

the effort toward professionalization. This alliance will be necessary (though it might not be sufficient) if new academic programs and structures are to be developed within higher education during a time of shrinking resources. By the same token, the programs designed by academics cannot operate in a vacuum. There has to be a close relationship and mutual support and feedback between academics and those working in the field. It is essential these days that academic programs have vocationally relevant outcomes.

Academics and Certification

I find it difficult to recommend to anyone that certification at any level be tied to academic coursework. Indeed, I have argued against it in many places for many years (Peters, Cohen, & McNichol, 1974; Peters & Honig, 1974; Peters & Kostelnik, 1980; Peters & McNichol, 1972).

Instead, I clearly prefer a competency-based system that would:

1. Permit the certification of all child care personnel to be centralized in one place;

2. Permit, with relative ease, the horizontal and vertical mobility of child care personnel;

3. Orient certification requirements toward the particular level, clientele, and setting of actual employment;

4. Allow for individual differences in personnel;

5. Make all requirements relevant to employment performance;

6. Allow for the input of communities into certification requirements;

7. Make certification requirements responsive to changes in the employment scene and to the on-the-job success of certified personnel;

8. Provide a reasonable basis for the recurrent certification or renewal of certification of personnel.

(Peters & McNichol, 1972)

However, such a system presupposes that the educational structure can facilitate people's learning of the knowledge and skills necessary for certification and, more importantly, that academically based professionals can provide the research methodology necessary for defining and validating the certification requirements.

Certification based upon past academic accomplishments is retrospective. Certification based on task analyses of current job structures is locked in the present. It sets what is as the standard for what should be. We have the means and methods to go beyond this, but it will take a more comprehensive approach (Peters, 1974; Peters & Dorman, 1974; Peters & Klein, 1980). It is the academic-based, knowledge-generating, child care leadership who will be responsible for doing so. It is they who have, or can generate, the resources and the know-how required and who are reinforced for doing so. It is they who help shape public and administrative policy in such matters through their writing and consultation. The wise among them will work closely with practitioners in the field as they undertake the task.

The national Child Development Associate (CDA) certification process is a case in point because it illustrates the role of the academic in formulating credentialling criteria and validating them (Pettygrove, 1981) while leaving the actual certification to others.

Academic and Self-regulation

Once definition of the knowledge base and entry level certification and a strong identity exist, maintenance of the profession through self-regulation is possible. This is the responsibility or domain of the academics only insofar as they are members, like other non-academic members, of the profession.

Leadership Preparation

Each of the points above suggests that the preparation of senior academic leadership is an essential ingredient for movement of the child care field toward professionalism. One might ask whether the child care field is ready to move in that direction.

The Knowledge Base

A number of researchers and program developers have elucidated the relationship between the conceptual or theoretical rationale of a training program and its applied implementation components (Peters & Dorman, 1974; Peters & Honig, 1974). While it is recognized that a one-to-one correspondence between theory and practice is seldom possible, it is clear that the theoretical rationale for a program provides a reference plane for program decisions. When conceptualizing a doctoral training program for personnel in child care, it seems important that the rationale incorporate a broadly conceived contextual theory of human development and methods of intervention, as well as recognition of the characteristics of educationally sound training models for adults. In essence, the former constitutes the unique knowledge base of the profession, and the latter the basis for its transmission to new members of the field. The general contextual model of child and adolescent development provides the central "theme" of the training program, and its uniqueness derives from its interdisciplinary perspective.

Psychology, medicine, education, sociology, and other disciplines have typically used an analytic approach to the study of children. Our research literature characteristically can be indexed by separate, and discrete topics of investigation. But it is increasingly clear that the

focus of research and intervention must be wider in order to accommodate the reality that children and youth function as integrated units and that each liability or asset they possess impinges upon others. It appears most reasonable to view each child as a complex of characteristics interacting with a complex of circumstances.

It follows from the positions stated that the knowledge base for an optimal approach toward child care must be derived from a synthesis of what is known from a variety of disciplines. Children, their families, teachers, caregivers, and others have multiple and interrelated problems. Some of these problems are directly related to working with the child and include such things as child-rearing, nutrition, health management, instructional practices, and social arrangements. Additionally, families and schools have problems indirectly related to but nevertheless affecting the child, such as financial problems, styles and attitudes of caregivers, physical environmental circumstances, and other complications. Some problems are the result of the presence of an exceptionality in the child or in the environment, while others actually produce additional exceptionalities.

This multiplicity of problems demands multifaceted intervention derived from a broad base knowledge of the process and context of development. Further, since most problems are interactive and overlapping, they must be approached in an integrated fashion. Thus, intervention with children must be interdisciplinary as well as multidisciplinary. Knowledge and procedures across relevant disciplines must be synthesized. Yet traditional personnel preparation programs seldom train persons with this synthesis in mind--particularly at the highly specialized doctoral level. At the doctoral level, child care personnel preparation must involve several different conceptions of integrated knowledge. The first, and the most traditional,

is disciplinary and hierarchical. By definition, a person successfully completing the Ph.D. (ar least within an academically respectable program) is competent within his or her discipline and has achieved the highest levels of integration of knowledge within that field. Such competence involves mastery of both the substantive knowledge base and the methodological tools required to extend that knowledge.

The second conception of integrated knowledge is interdisciplinary holistic. This conception of integration concerns relating more than one discipline or learning experiences from two or more programs by treating the interfaces or commonalities. Here, mastery is not the aim but rather a self-conscious understanding of wholes. The process is one of articulation without creating a basic change in the integrity of either discipline. The premise behind articulation is that by exposing students to perspectives of two or more disciplines, they will be better able to understand the problems of one field from the perspectives of the other. At the doctoral level, this form of integration of knowledge is frequently accomplished through a formal "minor." For child care, this minor would be in an allied discipline (e.g., special education, psychology).

The third conception of integrated knowledge is thematic and hierarchical. Here, the intent is for the creation of a synthesis of two or more disciplinary frameworks to produce a new approach to a common problem. The aim is mastery of a specialized subject or theme; for example, child care.

Given the nature of the contextual human developmental model that is most relevant to research and intervention with young children, it seems clear that the future leaders of the child care field will need an educational program that promotes all three levels of knowledge integration. Such a knowledge base does exist.

Selection

Given that there are a number of pragmatic reasons to focus upon the development of a cadre of academic leadership for the child care field, and given that there is a legitimate knowledge base for the effort, several other considerations come to mind. These involve issues of both selection and training. Space does not permit their full elaboration, but a few words seem appropriate.

First, in times of economic constraint for institutions of higher learning, there is no substitute for quality. Top quality people are the one protection a program has when budget decisions are made. This means that only top quality students should be selected to join the leadership team, no matter what their prior disciplinary training might have been. They should have in common, however, prior work experience in the child care field, commitment to the enhancement of the field, and a willingness to pursue interdisciplinary training of the most rigorous sort. Further, they must be dedicated to development of the research and evaluation skills necessary to advance the knowledge base. That is, they must desire to acquire the skills necessary for an academic leadership career.

Program Content and Structure

The design and conduct of an academic leadership program involve considerations of both structure and content. The two are intimately related. For example, in a field that is thoroughly committed to the use of practica or internships at all levels, a doctoral-level academic leadership program should include such experiences as well--in this case, practica in positions of research or public policy formation. Doing so models and reinforces a concept of what is considered most valuable in the field.

Similarly, in a field that places stress on demonstrated competency as the criterion of achievement, the doctoral-level training should also be organized around the achievement of substantive, methodological, and professional competencies.

The reader interested in examples of successful academic leadership programs are referred to Colvin and Zaffiro (1974) and Peters and Liben (1979).

Conclusions

It is recognized that these comments are those of an academic--and one who has been principally concerned with graduate education. It is recognized that the academic perspective is certainly not the only one on how to build a professional field. However, it is one that ought not be ignored.

If the goal is to build a distinctive profession that has external respect, internal control, and the means for enhancing the development of its members, there are both pragmatic and conceptual reasons for taking a top-down approach to thinking of the child care education field--for riding up the down escalator.

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